

The Power of Perspective

Too often we forget what it's like to be a child. We forget the anxieties and nervousness, and even the fear of getting things wrong or disappointing our parents. We forget what it's like to not understand. We can try to understand our child's perspective, but we consistently find it hard to see through their eyes.

This is something that our children themselves may not be able to do yet. Developmental researchers have identified an important capability called 'Theory of Mind.' Studies suggest that from around age five, we develop the capacity to see the world through another's eyes and to take their perspective. Prior to that, the brain is too immature and undeveloped to recognise that others might have an alternative perspective to their own. They are entirely egocentric. It's all about them. They don't care if we disagree. It's irrelevant. Their view is the only one.

Once their perspective capability kicks in—that is, once they've developed Theory of Mind—our children understand that just because they can see things one way, it doesn't mean others can also experience the same perspective—especially if they're in another place.

Just because adults can see another perspective doesn't mean we do. In fact, people with power (like parents) are less empathetic—less likely to look through another's eyes—than those with less power. We become impatient and demanding. We seek compliance. We get absorbed in solving our problems rather than understanding theirs.

“You did what!?”

A few years ago I received an email from a mum who had a beautiful story to tell:

I walked downstairs into my lounge room and saw my 4 year-old son surrounded by clothes. Then it dawned on me. The clothes baskets that I had left on the floor – the ones that held 4 loads of washing and ironing I'd just completed – were now empty. He was standing in the middle of the clothes, picking each item up and throwing it into the air. As he threw the clothing, he burst out laughing. So did his 18 month-old brother, who was watching the destruction of my washing like it was entertainment.

I was just about to blast him. I knew all the things I wanted to say. And once I'd said it, he was going straight to time out.

But then... I remembered you saying I should try to see the world through his eyes. I paused.

In my eyes he was being a brat, intent on demolishing all of my hard work. But in his eyes, perhaps he was something else.

Mustering all my self-control I quietly and calmly asked him, “What are you doing with all of that washing and ironing?”

He turned around when he heard my voice, smiled, and said, “Hi Mum.” It was like nothing had happened. I asked him again. Then he gave me this sweet explanation:

“You were asleep upstairs, and Josh (his little brother) was getting upset and I was scared he would wake you up. I started throwing things and it made him happy so you could sleep.”

Seeing Beyond Behaviour

If we are honest with ourselves, most of us will admit that we get things wrong from time to time when it comes to parenting and our children. We might get mad at a child for losing her shoes, and then realise we put them outside after we washed them. Or we might get cross at a child for not doing what we asked only to find out he was doing something for his dad, or his brother, or for someone else.

If our children were icebergs, their behaviour would be what we see above the water, but the larger part of the iceberg rests below the surface. This remains invisible unless we take the time to understand what is down there. Feelings, developmental progress, the broader context, and more all contribute to our children’s behaviour. Rather than getting mad at our children for being difficult or inconvenient we should try to see the world through their eyes.

It may be one of the hardest things for us to learn to do as a parent. We are always operating on our agenda and we expect our children to fall into line and step with us. While there are times when children do inexplicable, unexplainable things with nasty motives, those situations are typically rare. Even in those instances, a deep unmet need may be the driver of the challenging behaviour.

When we pause and make a point of trying to understand, we will usually find that our children are amazing people who really do want to do the right thing. They just need us to let go of our agenda, see the world through their eyes, and look for ways we can help them.



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